



News Release

Public Affairs Office
PO Box 1306
Albuquerque, NM 87103
505/248-6911
505/248-7401 (Fax)

Southwest Region (Arizona • New Mexico • Oklahoma • Texas) <http://southwest.fws.gov>

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Contacts: Jeff Humphrey, (NM), 602-889-5946, jeff_humphrey@fws.gov
Lesli Gray, (TX) 972-439-4542, lesli_gray@fws.gov

Service Approves Voluntary Conservation Agreements to Aid Rare Texas Mussel, Other Aquatic Species

Agreements will help protect and recover imperiled species and healthy watersheds, while providing regulatory assurances to participating landowners in New Mexico and Texas

Thanks to voluntary cooperative agreements finalized today, landowners and managers in southeast New Mexico and the Trans-Pecos region of Texas will have the opportunity to participate in conservation efforts for five native animals, including the Texas hornshell, a rare freshwater mussel recently proposed for protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has approved a Candidate Conservation Agreement (CCA) and a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) for the five species, all of which are unique to west Texas and southeastern New Mexico.

“Working with our partners, including the New Mexico State Land Office and the Center of Excellence, we can conserve the Texas hornshell and a suite of other aquatic species covered by the agreements and provide certainty to the landowners and companies that choose to participate,” said Amy Lueders, the Service’s Southwest Regional Director. “These voluntary agreements encourage landowner and industry participation in conservation and recovery efforts and underscore how important these partnerships are to our success.”

“The State Land Office manages nearly 90,000 acres of State Trust Lands that could be affected by the listing of the Texas hornshell mussel and other species, therefore I am pleased the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances is approved and we can move forward in partnership with our oil, gas, and agricultural lessees to implement conservation strategies that will aid in sensitive species recovery, protect their business interests, and allow the State Land Office to continue to generate revenue for education,” said State Land Commissioner Aubrey Dunn. “Many of our valued lessees have been extremely responsive to our efforts and I encourage others to enroll. The State Land Office stands ready to assist with the process.”

“The success of Candidate Conservation Agreements clearly demonstrates the value of cooperation when contemplating the conservation of species in peril. The notion that industry, ranching, recreation and conservation are incompatible in this arena has been transformed into a culture of cooperation, mutual concern and respect,” said Douglas C. Lynn, Executive Director, CEHMM. “The CCAA’s have proven time and again, that voluntary habitat protection and restoration can be successfully accomplished while preserving jobs and protecting the livelihoods that depend on the

land. The essence of the programs' success resides with people of extremely diverse backgrounds working together in efforts to achieve common goals."

CEHMM and the New Mexico State Land Office (NMSLO) submitted applications for an "enhancement of survival permit" under the ESA. Such permits allow actions that would otherwise be prohibited under the act because they benefit the conservation of a listed species. They are often issued in conjunction with CCAs or CCAAs. This permit and the associated CCA and CCAA will be in effect for 30 years and cover conservation activities that take place on federal and non-federal lands in the Black and Delaware rivers in Eddy County, New Mexico and Culberson County, Texas. The agreements cover known populations of the Texas hornshell, as well as the Rio Grande River cooter, gray redhorse, blue sucker and Pecos springsnail – all state-protected species that share habitat and conservation benefits with the hornshell.

CCAs and CCAAs are part of a broader government-led effort to balance the needs of wildlife with those of private landowners, industry and communities through voluntary cooperative agreements. CCAAs provide non-federal landowners and developers the opportunity to implement conservation practices that address specific threats with assurances that, if the species is later listed, they can continue to manage their land as outlined in their agreements with no additional regulatory requirements. Federal agencies, permittees and lessees can enter into CCAs, which carry no regulatory assurances, but do provide enrollees with a high degree of certainty that they will not be subject to increased land-use restrictions if the species is listed.

Once abundant throughout rivers in southern New Mexico and the Rio Grande basin in Texas and Mexico, the Texas hornshell has experienced a dramatic decline. Today, it is the only native mussel remaining in New Mexico and is scarce in Texas, occupying only 15 percent of its historical U.S. range. Habitat fragmentation and loss as a result of impoundments and reduced water quality and quantity are negatively impacting the Texas hornshell and other freshwater mussels across the Southwest. After thoroughly reviewing the best available science, in August 2016, the Service proposed to protect the hornshell as endangered under the ESA.

In a related issue, the Service announced a six-month extension to its deadline for making a final listing determination on the Texas hornshell. The Service extended the deadline on the 2016 listing proposal for the Texas hornshell in order to solicit additional scientific information on the status of the species in Mexico. We will make a final listing determination no later than February 10, 2018.

CEHMM and NMSLO will assist interested area landowners, lessees and developers with enrollment in the CCAA. For information, contact CEHMM (575-885-3700) or NMSLO (505-827-5760).

To learn more about the Endangered Species Program, visit <http://www.fws.gov/endangered/>.

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